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What We Do

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RYAN CARTER'S ANSWER TO "WHAT WE DO." A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE PLACE OF ITERATION IN OUR EXPLANATIONS TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

The study of architecture is not what I thought it to be. My first week in studio was akin to having a cooler of ice water dumped onto my head. There was no time to process the fact that my assumptions about what I'd learn were wrong. There was only the exhausting march forward; indeed that week will live as one of the most brutal weeks of my life as a student. No matter how many drawings or models I completed it was never enough. Inevitably, I would mention this to my family and friends. Their reply, "What are you doing that takes so much time?" My response was a non-answer like "I make models and stuff." After three years of design school I think I am beginning to grasp what exactly it is that I am learning to do. As a designer I generate.

Generation is not creating something from nothing. To the contrary, it is a long process of pursuing iteration after iteration of an idea. Thomas Edison knew his stuff when he stated, "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." Yes, I have ideas, but they are only ideas. There is a lot of ground to cover between an idea and a solution. Time and hard work crystallize ideas into reality. I believe that in architecture school we are being trained to fabricate, represent, and iterate solutions for ideas.

Solutions come from a variety of places. Many solutions are appropriated from things that already exist; think precedent study. Looking at how others have responded to similar problems is extremely helpful. The learning happens when you appropriate (not copy) someone else's solution to your specific situation. For instance, the idea for bookshelves has been around for many years. If you needed a bookshelf for your design you would appropriate the solution that has been around for so long. But, you would determine what material the shelves were made of, how many you needed, what color they would be, if the shelves would be at a forty-five degree angle or not, and the list goes on. The solution existed but you had to apply it to your unique situation.

If there is one key to being a generator, it is a questioning mind. There is only one truly effective way to find multiple solutions or iterate on an idea: that is to ask questions. Initially those questions might be " Why am I even doing this?" or "What time does Hobby Lobby close?" but the more experienced you become, the more valuable the questions that are asked.

Asking a question is like throwing a stone from the top of a hill. It rolls and gathers momentum, never stopping until it reaches a resting spot far from where it began. This is what is what generating involves. Many 'stones' thrown from many hills, are required in order to arrive at a solution for the challenge.

This is why a professor will most likely never be perfectly happy with the solution you offer. They will acknowledge that you have a good project (if you do) and then proceed to state what they wished you had pursued, and usually this involves them challenging you as the student with a series of questions. This is how they teach those of us who intend to become architects a questioning mind.

Professor Cal Lewis told me about an architect who said "Thank god we don't build schematic (or preliminary) design!" You may be curious as to why this is. It's because the preliminary work is not enough to be a finalized product. It has no depth to it or any layering of information.

Think of the complexity of a building; there is no way that the initial sketches and models we make are anywhere close to where they need to be in order for them to be 'built' (hypothetically). Sure, a motion study can lead to an interesting form, but without intensive questioning that interesting form will never be realized. There are questions to be asked about the structure, materiality, and enclosed spaces that have not yet even come to mind. Asking multiple questions is the ONLY way to arrive at a solution so the sooner the habit is acquired the better of you will be.

The many questions and iterations you work through will help you to better understand exactly what it is you are making. This gives a boost of confidence when talking to your studio instructor and during final review. It is something that will benefit you and eventually the people that use your product because it provides the layering necessary for good design.

In sum, we in architecture school are generators. The things we create are the result of a long, painful, and sometimes tear-inducing process. The pursuit of so many iterations to find and apply solutions is not easy. However, reiteration is essential to what we do. The only way to excel at being an architecture student is to ask questions and as a result, find answers. Then proceed to ask questions of those answers. And then proceed to ask questions of those answers. And then… I think you have the idea.

by Ryan Carter